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ABSTRACT

Examination of textbooks for teaching English as a foreign language (EFL) reveals a hidden agenda in many: globalization of a Western-styled consumer culture. Despite attempts to make textbooks more culturally inclusive, they still reflect ethnocentrism and conformity. Both sexism and heterocentrism are overt. Concurrently, among native English speakers, postmodern, feminist, and multiculturalist theories are joining to revise how we view and speak about the world: for example, generic masculine pronouns (he, his) are now commonly viewed as masculine, not neutral. It is important to eliminate sexism in the language class. A classroom experiment illustrates how gender differences affect the learning process. Students were divided into small single-gender groups to summarize an article they had read. The female groups quickly organized themselves for discussion and stayed on task, while most male groups functioned only minimally on task. Research also shows other gender differences in classroom interaction. To change sexist patterns of classroom interaction, language teachers can: ask more open-ended questions to females; allow more time for response; use exercises that develop active listening skills, productive/non-confrontational communication skills, and facilitative questioning; and promote student awareness of sexism in textbooks. Eighteen classroom activities are appended. Contains 20 references. (MSE)

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# Women are "busy, tall and beautiful:" Looking at sexism in EFL materials

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# Women are "busy, tall and beautiful:" Looking at sexism in EFL materials

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## INTRODUCTION

> *The only time my education was interrupted was when I was in school.*
> - George Bernard Shaw

It is a known fact that one of the tools used to maintain and support oppression is school textbooks. History is rarely anything more than a study of military battles written by those who won. Literature textbooks give students the minimum needed to be considered "cultured," presenting the authors in a sterile environment devoid of any controversial political ideas or sexual preferences which they might have had. Political science is almost entirely devoted to the support of the current world economic system with its dynamic mechanism of keeping 78% of the world's population in poverty. A critical look at EFL textbooks and teaching materials often finds that a hidden agenda exists in many: globalization of a Western-styled consumeristic culture. On the other hand, in native speaking areas, a revolution of sorts is going on inside the English language as the effects of post-modern theory join with feminist and multicultralist theory for a revision of how we see and speak about the world around us. In this article I would like to proceed by first giving some background definitions and then explore why this topic is important within the EFL classroom, presenting data taken from a variety of sources reflecting the sociolinguistical changes that have been occurring with English world-wide over the course of the last 30 years.

## WHAT CULTURE FOR THE WORLD?

For the most part, the textbooks used within an EFL setting are not just tools by which the English language is taught. A large dose of cultural content is also present within them. This cultural content is rarely, if ever, reflective of the learners' cultural setting, but rather promotes cultural imperialism for both Great Britain and the United States as ideals to be aimed

for with little or no critical reflection on the grave short comings both cultures have. In recent years efforts have been made to remove some of this linguistical hegemony, that is the domination exercised by mainstream groups over all those possessing differing racial, ethnic, national, creed, gender, or sexual identities. For the most part, books now produced for the international market include a variety of realia taken from native and non-native speaking countries reflecting diversity of the native culture. Sadly, books produced for local/national markets are not so inclusive and often continue to express stereotypical thinking about the native culture.

This "inclusiveness" of other cultures, ethnic groups, lands, and customs presented in EFL/ESL texts for the international market is controlled however by the cultural norms of a liberal economic ethic and often promotes the "globalization" of the liberal-democratic culture. In particular, the ethnocentrism of books designed for the young adult market frequently promote this globalization of uniform disciples of consumption who wear the same dress, listen to the same music and eat the same food stuffs regardless of their geographical location. Ethnocentrism is the oppression of cultures other than the dominant one in the belief that the dominant way of doing things is the superior way. If we look closely at the change in the dietary habits of young people (hamburgers, French Fries, and Coke®), not to mention the linguistic invasion of English terminology present on the business pages of any national or regional newspaper, we quickly realize that this ethnocentrism is a reality and is probably being supported by the learning of English.

International text writers are becoming more attentive to the embedded sexism of the books they produce. Sexism is the stereotyping of males and females on the basis of their gender; the oppression of women by society in the belief that gender is an indication of ability. The research conduced by David Carroll and Johanna Kowitz (1994) will show us how sexism is overtly present in EFL/ESL texts, some of their findings include:

- Male pronouns are more common than female pronouns, ranging from 2.55 - 3.84 to 1

- *Husband* is less common than *wife* but, the possessive *husband's* is more common than *wife's*

They also researched Key Word in Content concordance and found:

- *Rich, richest, poor, brave, short, bald, bad, lazy, important, famous, afraid, pleased* and *happy* collocated exclusively with *man/men*

- *Strong, tall, young, old* and *fat* collocated more strongly with *man/men* than *woman/women*

- *Angry* collocated more strongly with *women/women* than with *man/men*

- *Beautiful, pretty* and *busy* collocated exclusively with *woman/women.*

They conclude that in the 22 adjectives they studied, 18 were used for men, while only nine were used for women. Only 6 were used to describe both men and women.

Statistically, the most important adjectives used to describe women are: *busy, beautiful, pretty* and *tall.* Women are never described as: *important, famous, rich, poor, afraid, pleased or happy.*

Statistically, the most important adjectives used to describe men are: *poor, rich, young, old, strong, tall and fat.* Men are never described as *busy*, and they are relatively unlikely to be described as *angry*

What message is given to leaders who are taught from these books?

Women are busy being tall and beautiful.

Men are two groups: poor young strong and tall;
Or: rich old strong and fat.

This is blatant sexism.

Still a further look at EFL/ESL texts reveals that not only are they sexist they are also heterosexist and heterocentric. Heterocentrism is the belief that heterosexuality is somehow superior to, or more "natural" and "normal" than homosexuality, bisexuality or lesbianism. With relatively few exceptions, notably Heinle and Heinle's: *The Multicultural Workshop* by Linda Blanton and Linda Lee, lesbigay characters and content are completely lacking in ESL/EFL course books. This choice to ignore a whole group of people is heterosexism, the oppression of those of sexual orientations other than heterosexual. It is a proven fact that in a class of 30, 1 to 3 students will belong to this identity grouping. However, the institution of education and the people who work within it does almost nothing to promote their integration into the social fabric or use the tools of education to remove the centuries of ignorance and intolerance surrounding the subject.

## WHAT IS HAPPENING WITHIN ENGLISH?

Sexism is a system of beliefs and practices that affirm the dominance of men over women. Apprehended by most people as "only natural," sexism pervades social relations and institutions, affecting everything from people's domestic arrangement to their career choices. With the arrival of the feminist movement within English speaking countries, attention has been given to changing the structures which support and promote sexism within the society. One of these structures is language.

Gender is a salient distinction in English; its importance is underlined in ways so obvious we hardly notice them. For example: men and women in English-speaking culture are given different personal names; have distinct address forms; are denoted by gender-marked pronouns; differing adjectives can be used to describe their attributes (women are "pretty," men are "handsome") and so forth. These linguistic conventions encourage English speakers to pay attention to gender whether or not it is immediately relevant.

Not only does English (or French, Italian, and Spanish) call attention to gender, it does so in a way that makes the masculine gender normative. For example, the suffix "-ess" in *waitress* identifies it as the exception or deviant case and can only denote a woman. The two exceptions to this rule about occupational titles are, not coincidentally, nurse and prostitute.

A similar pattern affects third person singular pronouns, "he" is prescribed for generic and indefinite use. The item man, too, denotes both the male of the human species and the species as a whole, as well as a suffix used to form agent nouns and occupational term; e.g., foreman, fireman.

Many feminists have claimed that the use of generic masculine terms is more than just a symbolic declaration of women's lesser (deviant, invisible) status. Some would argue that the use of the English generic masculine is more damaging to women's interests; that it impedes communication and encourages discrimination.

What has happened during the course of the last thirty years is that the questioning put forth by the feminist movement has lead some contemporary English speakers to interpret generic masculines as masculine rather than generic. In conjunction with the other sociological changes that have occurred within the social fabric of English speaking societies, this interpretation of masculine generics referring to males is only a natural outcome, and the need to create a new linguistic structure that places both sexes on equal footing is taking place. This process is called de-gendering.

De-gendering is achieved through a variety of ways (Florent 1994, Rothblatt 1995). The most common has been to replace masculine with ungendered terms, producing what is called ***inclusive language.*** For example, *man* as a label for the species becomes humanity or humankind; replace the suffix "-man" with "-person" or some more precise designation; e.g., firefighter; compound words using "man-" are replaced by synonyms (e.g., staffing or personnel for manpower; artificial or synthetic for man-made). The pronoun problem is resolved either by pluralising whole sentences, (e.g., "any student wishing to consult his tutor" becomes "any students wishing to consult their tutors"), or -- in Britain and the US -- using "singular" they ("anyone wishing to consult their tutor should make an appointment...") with disjunctions like he/she, her/his, etc., available if these genderless variants are for some reason unacceptable.

British English prefers "Singular" they for the indefinite antecedents anyone, someone, everyone, no-one; indeed in this context it is often preferable to "he" on independent grounds, since indefinite pronouns may have a plural element in their meaning; such sentences as: "everyone came to the meeting and I was glad for his support" and "no-one brought his car since he knew there was nowhere to park it" are bizarre, and only slavish adherence to the prescriptive norms of correctness could induce native speakers to use them. In contrast there are some sentences with clearly singular constituents, where the co-occurrence of a plural pronoun (especially if it comes close to its antecedent and is in a form other than the subject case) may strike many native speakers as of dubious acceptability -- e.g., "The yuppie who snorts cocaine on their lunch break will soon have trouble supporting their habit," which is more likely to be made gender neutral by judicious rephrasing or pluralisation.

## GENDER DIFFERENCES AND THE LANGUAGE LEARNER

Not only must we be aware of the sexism within language, we must also strive to eliminate sexism within our classrooms and our teaching style. An important finding for classrooms is that the sex of the teacher makes less difference on the way she/he behaves than the sex of her or his students.

Very little research has been conduced on this topic within the L2 classroom as so we must rely on studies carried out in other subjects (Ekstrand, 1980; French and French, 1984). What this research has discovered is:

- Very often boys receive more teacher attention than girls;
- Boys get more blame, approval, disapproval and instructions than girls;
- Girls who call out answers are reprimanded more than boys who call out;
- Boys receive more "wait time";

- Girls are asked more "product question" (What is the answer to number 5?), while boys are asked more "process questions" (Why is the answer to number 5 twenty-three meters?)

**TALK-INHIBITION STRATEGIES IN WHOLE CLASS SETTINGS:**

Coates (1987, 1989 a,b,c, 1991, 1993), Corson (1993), Holmes (1988, 1992 a,b), Tannen (1986, 1991) and others have shown that men and women talk differently. Women appear co-operative, facilitative participants, demonstrating in a variety of ways their concern for their conversational partners, while men tend to dominate the talking time, interrupt more often than women, and focus on content of the interaction and the task at hand, at the expense of attention to their addressees. Moreover, men retain conversational control simply by talking for longer and taking more frequent turns than women.

Most language learners consider opportunities to talk and practice using the language very important. These patterns of male domination of talking time in ELT classrooms give reason for concern that women are getting less than their fair share of opportunities to practice using English.

**INTERRUPTING IN SMALL GROUPS:**

Men frequently self-select as group leaders, and then interrupt others to keep the group "on task," regardless of the feelings being expressed by the speaker or their relevance to the direction and overall goals of the discussion.

In order to see how valid this assumption is, I carried out an experiment in which I divided my class into same-sex small groups. I was in a large lecture hall, so the students had plenty of space to organize their groups. However, I had all the female groups to sit on one side of the lecture hall and the males to sit on the other. I then gave each group the task of summarizing an article they had read at home ("Can We Talk?" An interview with Deborah Tannen by Peggy Taylor, New Age Journal). The task in itself soon became secondary in importance to what I observed. The all-female groups, under their own direction, soon had organized into one large group with a core of three leaders who were coordinating brainstorming and writing processes. All the female students were on-task and working at something. The all-male groups remained broken into small groups, with only two groups functioning as a unit out of ten groups of 3 - 4 persons. In the other groups, one male student was doing the writing and completion of task, while the other members were off-task. The women completed the task in 20 minutes. The males were still trying to organize themselves and tried to save face by arguing that I should agree to accept the only completed summary as valid for all the male groups. It is my conclusion that while males like to dominate the discussion, they do not like to be required to menial tasks; e.g., keep notes about the discussion. When grouped by themselves, my male students confirmed the hypothesis expressed by Tannen in the article they read at home: males do not know how to communicate

effectively among themselves. When I pointed out what had occurred in the two groups, the males replied that "they didn't know" they could form one group. I purposely had left the directions open-ended to see what route the groups would take on their own. This attitude by the males would underscore the hypothesis that males interpret "on-task" based on the directions given, whereas female students are more likely to adapt directions to facilitate task completion.

### CHALLENGES AND DISAGREEMENTS:

In some contexts men seem to maximize disagreements, argue and challenge each other (so called "one-up, one-down" behaviour). Women on the other hand, tend to stress agreement; their talk is essentially friendly (Maltz and Borker, 1982). Male challenges and disagreements had the effect of discouraging the women from participating as enthusiastically as they otherwise might and thus discouraging women from contributing freely to the discussion.

### "RESPONSE-RESTRICTING" QUESTIONS:

As pointed out above, women are often asked product questions that restrict their answer options; i.e., yes/no or either/or answers. A process question is an "open question" in which the answer possibilities apparently give the respondent more discretion over the length and content of the response. Hence, the conclusion drawn is that product questions have the effect of closing off and stifling discussion.

## WHAT TO DO TO CHANGE THE SITUATION

The patterns of interaction that characterize female-male behaviour reflect and perpetuate the structured inequalities which characterize the relationships between women and men in most societies. Therefore as teachers of language we need to:

- Ask more open-questions to female students;
- Allow more "wait time" in responding; research has show that the average wait time an instructor gives a student is three seconds, when wait time is increased to 7 - 15 seconds, learners produce more correct responses;
- Male students need exercises to help them develop talk-support skills. Such activities include:
    - Active listening skills to give support and encouragement to

**GOOD LISTENING SKILLS**

- Face the speaker and maintain eye contact
- Give either verbal or nonverbal signs that you are listening
- Pay close attention to what the speaker is saying as well as his/her body language
- Ask questions to clarify what you heard
- Give feedback to see if you clearly understood the message of the conversation
- Compliment the speaker
- Try to understand how the speaker is feeling and reflect the feelings you pick up back to the speaker
- Don't allow your personal biases to affect what you are hearing
- Offer suggestions rather than advice

their conversation partners. (See box on pervious page.)

- Provide utterances which confirm points made by their partners, elaborating and developing their partner's points from their own experience.
- Express disagreement in a non-confrontational manner; i.e. Win-Win.
- Ask facilitative questions which encourage others to contribute to the discussion.

An important task for teacher education is to raise awareness of the nature of materials and to develop the skills to identify and evaluate how gender and gender issues are dealt with in the materials teachers choose or are directed to use. Female characters are numerically fewer in coursebooks and have more limited occupational and discourse roles than males. Thus, it can be concluded that an impact of this reality also affects classroom practices and restricts female students' language learning opportunities. Arising out of this, teachers need to develop the awareness in their learners of this overt sexism. In terms of interaction with text, learners need to be encouraged to:

1. Analyse what attitudes about gender and gender roles are reflected in the material;
2. Examine whether what people do and say and how they do and say things is linked to their position as men and women in society, in the family, in the culture of the workplace, etc.;
3. Consider role reversals for male and female characters in the situation presented;
4. Explore reactions to characters that are not 'gender correct', i.e. a woman pilot, a househusband; ways of using language that are not 'gender appropriate', i.e. women leading decision processes, Board of Director meetings, etc.;
5. Contest existing assumptions about gender and gender roles in communication.

In conclusion, the subtle message conveyed by male domination concerning the paramount importance of male talk and male experience in the classroom is no longer acceptable to those concerned with the rights and self-esteem of female students. Social justice in the language learning classroom involves providing a receptive environment for females which encourages and stimulates them. A change in the sexism of education can be created only through effort on the part of language instructors to bring about a change in themselves. For me it meant to consciously note who I called on for answers and evaluate why I was calling on that person and not another. Since sexism is often overtly learned and instilled within us, we must make conscious efforts at eliminating it from our classroom practices and our speech. Being male I have had to learn not to interrupt others when speaking, listening until the speaker has finished, then expressing my point of view/idea. It has not been easy. On the other hand, having made the effort to achieve these small changes my own communication style, I believe that I am better able to address the needs of my female learners and ensure that they are receiving quantity and quality attention.

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## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

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The author welcomes feedback from teachers concerning the application of these activities and student reactions to them.

1. Using the imaginative conditional (2nd conditional) have female students complete: "If I were a man, I would (like to) ...; Male students: "If I were a woman, I would (like to)...". When students share their answers, if a female says something like: "...I would play basketball." Ask why she doesn't, if she would like to and what makes her think she can't. Good way to start an open discussion of sex-assigned roles.

2. A variation of 1; have female students answer "I would like to be a man because..." and males "I would like to be a woman because..." This activity indicates what the students see as the privileges and burdens of each sex, and how they perceive the division of roles between sexes. Male students rarely can come up with more than a couple of reasons. Female students often make a list.

3. Collect pictures of people with various facial types. In class, have students speculate on what the person may be like. Note what types of reactions students have. Do they react more favourably to women who fit traditional concepts of "feminine" and men who fit the traditional concept of "masculine?" Also note the range of fantasy they use for

occupations, personality and life styles. What about marital status and number of children? If students say one woman is married and another isn't, find out why they think this.

4. Make a collection of stick figures, which are indistinguishable sexually, holding objects or doing something; e.g., driving a bus, holding a soccer ball, standing by a stove. Have students make up stories about each one and note the pronoun used. Ask why they chose the male or female pronoun for the object.

5. Make a list of "ways I have benefited by being a male/female today." One list of positives, and one list of negatives.

6. Have females pretend they are male and plan their future using a date line for 5 - 10 - 15 - 20 years and a variety of future tenses. Male students plan for their future pretending they are female. Then have the students discuss their real plans for the future compared to what they wrote. Discuss the causes of differences and why being a male or female should affect one's career goals and objectives.

7. Role-reversal game. When teaching about wedding habits, conduct a marriage ceremony in which the mother gives away the groom, the couple is pronounced "woman and husband" instead of "man and wife", and become Mrs. and Mr. Maria Sorrento. Then the male students are interviewed about "married life." Questions to be asked include: their favorite home repair techniques, how they combine marriage and career, what size suit they wear, how they manage to s[illegible] young and handsome, what's their favorite soap opera, what magazines do they read, best laundry detergent, etc. The discussion following this activity should illustrate to the class the absurdity of some of our conventions that keep men's and women's roles strictly defined.

8. Have students complete: "Today is my 80th birthday, my life has been good because..." Students are to look back over their life since they were in high school. This exercise shows their aspirations and expectations. In the follow-up discussion have the student discuss what on their lists is strictly tied to being male or female and why.

9. Have the students brainstorm for ten minutes making a list of characteristics of women/men. If they have difficulty, tell them to try thinking about one woman/man they know and admire. Then divide the class into small groups and have each individual read their list, then say which characteristics on the list are true of themselves, then which characteristics they like. Each small group is then to select ten items from the combined lists that they think are most important. It is essential that they agree on the meaning of each characteristic. Then have the students rank the items from one to ten. Ask the students: "Who is the person they have created? The ideal woman/man? The typical woman/man? Are the characteristics

positive or negative and why?" Variations of this can be done: females working on female characteristics and males on male, vice versa, both sexes working on the same sex, all-female and all-male groups, mixed small groups. Have the teams compare their results. What differences exist? In the mixed groups who dominated? Males or females? Why?

10. Have the class line up in a straight line and tell them to pick their position on the basis of their importance. {DO NOT tell them what to judge importance on.} Set a time limit of 15 - 20 minutes to do this. Afterwards, ask the students their reasons for the organization of the line? Point out where the women are and ask why? On what grounds was their importance decided compared to the men?

11. Writing activity. Have females write on the following topics: "What I like best about being a woman. What I like least about being a woman. What I like most in men. What I like the least. Reverse for males. Tabulate the answers when reading the students writing and present the data as a discussion topic in class. Get the students to discuss the origins of the likes and dislikes.

12. Have students monitor TV advertisements for sexism and use of sexist images in product promotion.

13. Observed class discussion. Have the male students sit in a circle and the females sit in a circle around them.

Each female picks a male to observe his verbal and nonverbal communication (great way to point out paralinguistics to students). The female students do not say anything while the males are talking.

The males pick one of the following topics for discussion:

What they like about being male.
What they don't like about being male.
What they like about females.
What they don't like about females.

When the males are finished, each female gives her observations of what the male she was watching said (verbally) and did (nonverbal gestures, movements, body position). The males cannot say anything while the females are discussing them.

Reverse everything with the females in the center circle and the males doing the observations.

Afterwards, have a general discussion about how everyone felt, their reactions, particularly note the paralinguistic activity. Did females or males use more non-verbal communication? What does this tell the opposite sex in his/her communication?

14. Set up a display of environmentally friendly cosmetics (no animal testing, please!), beauty equipment, hair gels, foams, sprays, etc. If you can get away with it, have the males put on makeup and discuss how it affects their self-perception. The females in the class once again are silent and choose one male to observe for verbal and non-

verbal communication. After the males have spoken, the females discuss how they feel with and without makeup and why the feel this way.

15. Have students bring to class their favorite comic books/magazines. Discuss the roles portrayed in them regarding the status of women. (Many popular comics for males are extremely violent and portray women as objects of sexual desires or sexually stimulating violence.)

16. Divide the class into small groups. Bring in a big stack of old magazines, scissors and paste. In groups have the students make a collage of the "ideal woman" and the "ideal man." They need to include physical description, emotional characteristics, personality, and mannerisms. Then have each group explain their ideas.

17. As a homework project, have the students watch a television situation comedy or serial program which includes a woman in a lead role. The students are to analyze the role the woman plays. What is her personality like? What type of person is she? What does the character say about society's generalizations about women? The students can report their findings to the class in either a skit or an oral report.

18. Students can analyze nursery rhymes or children's stories which include women alone or both males and females. What is the role played by each person? What do they think this implies or suggests as to the way females and males see themselves?